

Priorities for the RECLAIM Act:
Ensuring Coal Communities Get a Program That
Grows Local Economies and Cleans Up Abandoned Mines

Introduction

Many coalfield communities are working hard to build a new economy amidst the recent changes in the coal industry. Despite the challenges, many communities see a bright future ahead and are taking steps to realize that vision. As part of that effort, many communities throughout the coalfields have demonstrated their support for the type of strategic federal investment that the RECLAIM Act would employ.

The RECLAIM Act is an opportunity to create innovative economic opportunities by addressing historic environmental problems (pre-1977 abandoned coal mines) in communities with significant economic distress. This bill could put laid-off miners and other local residents to work reclaiming abandoned mines in ways that develop long-term economic opportunities in agriculture, recreational tourism energy, and more on reclaimed mines.

The transition to a diversified economy should be guided by a set of principles oriented around creating strong, vibrant communities through a just process, beginning with deep engagement of community members in the process of forging their new economy. *As a policy initiative that will assist communities in creating economic opportunities and addressing historic environmental problems, the RECLAIM Act should be congruent with those principles.*

Likewise, the RECLAIM Act should fulfill criteria necessary for the program to achieve its explicit goals of growing local economies and cleaning up abandoned mines.

Guiding Principles

- Improve the quality of life for people and communities affected by economic disruption, environmental damage, and inequality.
- Foster inclusion, participation and collaboration.
- Generate stable, family-sustaining, meaningful jobs and broad access to opportunities and benefits.
- Promote innovation, self-reliance and broadly held local wealth.
- Protect and restore public health and our environment.
- Respect the past while also strengthening communities and culture.

Criteria

The RECLAIM Act will be best suited to achieve the bill's explicit goal of growing local economies and cleaning up environmental problems if the final language of the bill authorizes this policy to do the following:

1. Ensure economic benefits reach communities with significant economic need.

Targeting RECLAIM AML projects in communities with significant economic distress will improve the quality of life for the communities that have been most directly affected by changes in the economy and by environmental damage.

2. Within each state, ensure a variety of stakeholders shape the vision and priorities regarding the types of projects to be pursued under this program.

In order to solicit and develop the most strategic economic projects possible across the state, collaboration and the sharing of expertise from various relevant sectors is necessary *at the administrative, or program-wide, level*. While state AML officials possess significant mine reclamation expertise, they are not agencies tooled for economic and community development. In order to bolster the ability of these agencies to develop mine reclamation projects with an economic focus, and to ensure that eligible communities actually receive needed support, it is crucial to ensure that a variety of stakeholders shape the vision and priorities regarding the types of projects to be pursued under this program. Critical stakeholders include community members in directly-impacted areas, local governments, mine workers and their unions, business leaders, watershed organizations, planning and economic development experts, and community-rooted non-profit and advocacy organizations. Doing so would allow the agency to benefit from the expertise of professionals and community members with useful perspectives on local economic needs, strategic community development tactics or plans, or other factors vital to the development of projects that both successfully reclaim sites *and* achieve strategic community development goals.

We think it is important to ensure that citizens of impacted communities who might not otherwise be aware of the AML program *are* made aware of the remarkable opportunity presented by this program. We also believe that the officials implementing projects stand to benefit in terms of project ideas and local support by soliciting ideas and input through a series of public meetings in impacted communities. The greater the local buzz and interest, the better selection of projects—and the greater the opportunity for collaboration. Genuine community involvement is crucial to the long-term success of this program.

3. Ensure that *each individual project* is characterized by robust stakeholder collaboration.

Stakeholder collaboration will foster inclusion and collaboration that will result in the projects with the greatest impact. Community members often know best what their local economy needs. The success of RECLAIM will rely on implementation of projects with significant community buy-in, which is best achieved if the multiple actors in impacted communities (as outlined above) are given the chance to introduce projects. An ideal process gives everyone with a stake in the outcome a chance to be heard and considered, not just elected officials, agencies, and major business leaders.

4. Prioritize innovative economic projects that direct economic benefits to the local community.

Prioritizing local businesses, projects that are locally-owned, and/or projects that build on the community's existing assets will ensure that the wealth—broadly conceived—produced by these economic projects stays in the local community. This will also increase the likelihood of projects that create stable, family-sustaining, and meaningful jobs.

5. Ensure that states have sufficient time and resources to solicit, select, and implement the best projects.

Giving states adequate time to identify and develop projects will enable them to implement a robust participatory process and work with communities and their staff and partners to create the most innovative, forward-looking projects possible.